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# THE SCHOOL REVIEW

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## A JOURNAL OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

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### THE TEACHER'S EQUIPMENT FOR WORK IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Preparation for teaching literature implies, first, an acquaintance with the subject. This means that the teacher must have read the English masterpieces, and have formed opinions about them which he can intelligently announce and which he can illustrate with apt quotation. An extensive acquaintance with literature presupposes a generous opportunity of time and a habit of unremitting application. The opportunity of time is duly provided in our school arrangements. Saturdays and vacations are not meant for idleness, but for mental refreshing and enrichment. The habit of unremitting application is the great desideratum.

The literature teacher must be a perpetual reader. It is astonishing with what rapidity one ranges through the great books when one has caught the movement and the impulse. The books you read soon begin to correlate themselves, and you feel an inspiring sense of unity coming to give character to your acquisitions, so that you become conscious of a dawning perception that English literature is an entity of itself, with perfect interdependence of parts. You come to perceive that you can properly read nothing by itself. The habitual reader finds all difficulties diminishing in the light of his increasing knowledge.

The Elizabethan literature, *e. g.*, seems to the beginner to be almost as hard as Latin, though luckily far less dry. A resolute course in Shakespeare soon sweeps away the greatest obstacles to rapid and secure reading, and leaves you free to add author to author. No one has a true right to teach literature who still imagines that the phrase Elizabethan literature means simply the

aggregate of writings produced at a certain time. And no one who has read a good many of the Elizabethan books can dwell in this delusion. Elizabethan literature is not merely literature of a certain period, but literature of a certain character, capable of demarcation from that which went before and from that which came after. Milton shows us the Elizabethan spirit colored with puritanism; Clarendon shows us the Elizabethan spirit colored with obsequious loyalty. One cannot read somewhat widely in the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries without perceiving at last the true note of the so-called Elizabethan period; and this perception makes all additional reading easy, and justifies the study of literary history in such works as those of Ten Brink, Taine, Saintsbury, and Gosse.

For he who is to teach English literature absolutely must have more than a text-book knowledge of his subject. He must not have filled his mind with other men's opinions. These, some fine day, he may forget, as one does always with matter gathered for examination. The routine teacher of literature wants a book of criticisms. These you may find him giving out as lessons and hearing recited, justifying himself, if he is nevertheless peculiarly bright, by reference to Mr. Harris's dictum about all knowledge being contained in books and the consequent necessity of ever teaching from a book. But not to enter here any further into the subject of methods of teaching, it is to be insisted on that the teacher is professionally untrained whose knowledge was chiefly got at second hand. The text-book of criticisms and estimates conveys no knowledge. To be able to repeat an utterance about Dryden's services to English prose is not to know anything about Dryden's services to English prose. Only he who has sampled Dryden and the prose of his predecessors and his successors knows what a change in prose style that great poet inaugurated.

The text-book opiate has worked in the pedagogic mind, and genuine enterprise seems asleep. One teacher fancies he must attend some lectures and get new ideas. Another procures a little book and reads a few paragraphs about authors. The lecture and the text-book are simple delusions. The number of persons capable of producing both is now very great. This indirect, or second-hand, knowledge of literary works is a sterile possession, incapable of breeding more knowledge. Only he is a

fecund teacher who genuinely knows that which he professes to know, that is, who knows directly and without mediation. Only he is possessed of seminal power as a teacher of literature who has read in his own time and with his own eyes and his own understanding. It is possible to hear committed matter repeated and to conduct examinations in memorized dicta of books and lectures. But how can a teacher speak with inspiration and encouragement about a writer, a poem, a play, unless his knowledge is at first hand, and he has himself known the thrill of sympathy?

Preëminently the teacher of literature must be a constant reader of the great books. It will not suffice to have read certain masterpieces and then to rest content with that achievement. The teacher must be always reading. His task has no end. If he is to give advice about reading, his own reading must be more than a memory. He must ever remain in touch with the sources of literary delight.

Of modern criticisms and expositions of the older authors the teacher will know how to make wise and fruitful use when he has to some extent himself commanded the field which they profess to explore. You are prepared to read such a book as Jusserand's *Theatre in England* only when you have read a number of old plays. To read Beljame's essays on the Eighteenth Century in *English Literature* you have no right at all until you have read well into Dryden, Addison, and Pope. The current magazines abound in expository criticisms of the older writers. With these criticisms you have no concern unless you also have come into contact with the older writers whom the modern essayists profess to elucidate. There is a certain amount of really important modern writing devoted to the older literature. It is not right to recommend that good modern critical work be neglected. To see how our acutest contemporaries look upon the venerable names is naturally most interesting. It must be remembered, however, that the time to peruse modern writing about ancient writers is only when one has earned the right to this luxury by reading the ancient writers themselves.

Reading is usually considered a pastime by those accustomed to read only current fiction. Often enough we read merely to beguile the time. But the intending teacher of literature must make his reading a serious study, and devote to it such laborious

evenings as the zealous microscopist devotes to his instrument. The reader of a modern novel may read in bed. He who makes his reading a study must put himself in a posture of work. He must be ever ready to lift up great dictionaries and encyclopædias, turn the leaves of many books, search for related matters, meditate on difficulties. Above all, he must keep his pen going, and must accumulate his own queries, his own commentaries. Whether you keep a cash account or not, you must, as a student of literature, keep a literary diary. To-day you begin *Hudibras*, and find out how to pronounce the name; you have to look up such and such references and allusions; being fresh from *Comus*, you are shocked by this dreadful immorality and irreverence; you consider wherein consists the peculiar metric effect of *Hudibras*; you seek to write down the reason why its movement is so queer as compared with that of *L'Allegro* or that of the *Lady of the Lake*; you note the vulgarity of the diction; you recognize and excerpt passages of wit and wisdom. In this way you treat much that you read,—all, in fact, that is of great fame in literary history. By perpetually giving free rein to your curiosity you enlarge your knowledge. Moreover, it is only by satisfying curiosity that the curious habit is to be kept active. Simply to put difficulties by and to read on with indolent acquiescence in vagueness of knowledge is to dally with stupidity as with a friend. Cultivate and nurse the habit of curiosity. Cultivate no less the habit of noting down in writing your queries and your discoveries. To put your doubt or your surmise into English good and clear enough to convey your meaning to another person, though you have no intention of taking a partner in your researches, is to make more precise to yourself the boundaries of your knowledge. Reading that is not pure recreation, but is largely study and comparison, inevitably suggests excursions in many directions. The results of these episodic additions to your main task you must record, or run the risk of losing in the medley of miscellaneous shreds and patches of information with which your baggage becomes cluttered as you travel on, and which finally becomes non-existent to you for practical purposes because you have no idea where the particular items are to be found. You must read as if you had ultimately to prepare lectures, adorning them with apt quotation. For though you will hardly be likely, as a secondary teacher, to

be called upon actually to lecture before public bodies on themes of literature, you will find it comforting to be able to appreciate the deliverances of those who have popular platforms at their command; and, what is much more important, you will find that ability to lecture is none too great a power to be possessed by a teacher who has conceived an ambition to make the recitation in literature a genuine incentive to literary study. Of course you will not read lectures in your classes. Leave that to the professors. But the fulness of mind that would qualify you to write lectures you must use in the "seminary" method, provoking questions and answering them in such ways as to keep curiosity alive.

It will be impossible to read English literature intelligently or to teach it effectively without considerable acquaintance with English history. In fact, literature is a perpetual comment on life. History records events and explains the development of institutions. Literature records the thoughts and emotions of men in the presence of these events. The literature of a period is meaningless until we can connect it with the main currents of thought that moved the minds of men in that period. It is useless therefore to try to interest young pupils in literary history. Only so fast as the learner comes to know something of the political and social history of a time, can he begin to understand the springs of literary motives, and see why writers chose such and such themes. Literature is not a separate interest: it does not beget new works out of itself, as if it had a generative faculty and produced new works out of works already existing. Literature grows out of the national life, and its constant endeavor is to picture and criticize this life. Hence a vigorous national consciousness gives birth to a vigorous literature. A feeble literature, without the power to stir minds, and called upon only to furnish amusement, betrays an age devoted to material prosperity, unmoved by great ideas. An age that has perpetually to fight for its civil and political liberties must necessarily have thoughts and emotions very different from those of an age that enjoys its liberty as a matter of course, and cannot quite understand how it is possible to grow enthusiastic over that abstraction. An age that has thrown off an ancient ecclesiastical tyranny has experienced an elation of soul which its successors can never precisely repeat. An age of adventurous voyaging for discovery of new lands has a

stimulus to its imagination which is impossible to an age in which the discoverer's occupation is gone.

Literature therefore must be read as furnishing the key to the spiritual life of its time. The historian of a period must know its whole literature. The student of a literary period must take cognizance of the political and social life of that period. The teacher of literature cannot exempt himself from being also a teacher of history, whether the school arrangements in set terms provide for such an arrangement or not. Pilgrim's Progress belongs to literature, but is an epitome of the puritan century. Bunyan was thrown into gaol by the civil power. Milton, Marvell, Clarendon, Waller, writers of literature, were politicians. All Milton's greater poems, from *Comus* to *Samson*, have their political aspects. You will find it difficult to name a writer of any rank whatever, and you certainly will not find a writer of great rank, who was not the creature of his time. If by pure literature you mean literature unrelated to secular matters, you will find pure literature only in sporadic fragments. In literature for its own sake no enterprising generation is greatly interested. The religious lyric, the hymn, may succeed in clothing a perennial human emotion in moving and thrilling forms of verse, so that it shall continue to be sung. But even hymns gradually become antiquated, and are seen to belong, not to all time, but to a by-gone time. Then, ceasing to sing them as expressing rightly our emotions, we embalm them as literature, to be studied as products of their own age. Gray isolated himself from his contemporaries, but made his verse intricate with historical allusion.

With the perspective of literary history the teacher will naturally become more and more familiar as he reads more widely and comes to perceive the interaction of writers and the inheritance of literary influences. The accomplished scholar groups the writers of a given year with due regard for chronological and social facts. There is no dispensing with dates. If you have unfortunately been inoculated with contempt for the memorizing of dates, you must unlearn this prejudice, and proceed to acquire, as a permanent fund of valuable knowledge, some hundred or more of those useful and fundamental elements. The contemporaneity and the succession of writers are asserted by the simple announcement of the years of their birth and death. It is futile to try to

expound a literary period without being able to place together in it the men who actually lived at the time, and to represent them as related thus or thus as regards age and social position. There is no mnemonic device that will serve in lieu of slowly acquired command of detail. There is so much lecturing and magazine writing going on about English literature, that the teacher may be easily tempted to assume the silly role of humility and profess himself content with hearing and reading abler expounders. This is the teacher who knows what belongs to a frippery.

Multitudes of men in every generation express themselves with energy on subjects of general interest; yet very few of these men contribute to literature. Most utterances perish at once. The secret of the vitality and the endurance of certain compositions evidently lies in their form. Without some peculiar grace or vigor of style, some special power of commanding attention, no human deliverance is heeded after its author has passed away. The great writers were, perhaps unconsciously, great artists. That a book two or three hundred years old should still be read with pleasure is a mystery that needs explanation. Why are we so eager to assert the supreme excellence of Shakespeare? What was the art of the men who seem to have written for all time?

While the teacher of literature in a secondary school may well shrink from attempting an exposition of the principles of literary art, he must, nevertheless, have attained to a clear conception of the importance of literary form. He must have cleared his mind of any old prepossessions he may be disposed to cherish in favor of the insignificance of form as compared with substance. In any writing whatever the form counts for a great deal: in impressive writing it is the all-in-all. You cannot escape from the charm of sentiment well expressed; and if the expression be especially neat, you are tempted not to care though the sentiment be odious. If we esteem old literature as the record of the thoughts and emotions of old times, we must remember that this old literature would not now be in existence but for its eminent power to draw and hold attention. The teacher has therefore to consider, not merely what a writer says, but quite as much, and often far more, the way in which he says it. It is necessary to have an eye always on the literary form. To know what are the elements of form, to be able to recognize these elements and explain their ef-



fectiveness in particular passages, is his duty as teacher. Luckily this is a part of his function in which he will not be much misled by the petty annotations with which the text-books are apt to be loaded.

An amorphous work, like the Excursion or the Task, may command a certain amount of attention by virtue of various pleasing qualities of style, of spiritual elevation, of satiric wit. But only those works which have distinct unity of configuration, which are rounded and finished on an artistic plan, and in which all the details of execution as regards style and diction combine to adorn the entire structure, can claim the rank of literary masterpieces. The Declaration of Independence is a document of supreme interest; its importance depends on its substance: Othello is a document of supreme interest; its importance depends on its form.

The secondary teacher of literature will of course have made a study of poetics. To have read some book on this subject will have been useful only if such reading has prompted him to investigations of his own. His study should be a study of poems, and not a study of theories, definitions, and expositions. It is a dreadful fate to have one's conclusions cast in borrowed moulds. The teacher should think out for himself the several categories under which a poem may be considered, and then should compare many poems, to find in what elements they are alike and in what elements they differ. The term poetry has an immense denotation. To settle precisely what is its meaning in *intension* is very difficult. But something there is which poems the most unlike have in common,—the Rape of the Lock, *e. g.*, and the Character of the Happy Warrior. And this something lies deeper than the mere fact that the poems are all written in rhythmic language. If to teach poetics, it were necessary to begin by defining poetry, there would hardly be any beginning of the subject made at all. But the definition of poetry, in a true pedagogic conception of the matter, belongs at the end of the study, rather than at the beginning, and can even then be perfectly well dispensed with. For pedagogic purposes the essential thing is to proceed in full consciousness of the presence of common characteristics and to try to perceive and describe these in many separate instances.

The subject of *metric* is so obvious an element of the general topic of poetics, that it is difficult to understand how it should be so commonly neglected in literature classes. To investigate many poems with especial regard to their metric form is a most interesting employment. The counting of syllables and the location of accents and pauses will be undertaken with avidity by pupils once initiated into the secret of metric regularity. Hence the teacher should have duly equipped himself in advance with a reasonable amount of metric study. The work will be profoundly interesting. Treatises large and small can be found if one feels the need of adventitious help. The best and simplest is the largest, and is in German. This is Schipper's *Englische Metrik*. Schipper quotes an enormous number of passages, and indexes them for reference. But the teacher who is also a student had better proceed in the purely inductive way, by collecting specimens and making comparisons. You find what is nominally the same blank verse in Shakespeare, in Milton, and in Tennyson. But in these three poets the verse produces extremely different effects. Examine the three specimens with the view to understand these differences. Go entirely through Gray, making minute comments on his verse peculiarities. The volumes of Scott and Wordsworth furnish metric specimens in immense variety. Take hold anywhere; you cannot begin in a bad place. Only do not wait for an opportunity to attend a summer school or to hear some professor lecture.

Among his other accomplishments the teacher of literature should be able to read passages of prose or verse in such a way as to elucidate and emphasize their meaning. When an extract has been mangled by careless pupils, the teacher should take it up and render it with its proper expression. A good elocution will stand the teacher in better stead than profound knowledge. Pupils are to be taught in this matter much more by example than by precept. Sometimes a piece first becomes interesting when it is heard well read.

As a student of English literature you have constant occasion to consider matters of pure grammar. Therefore you must be also a student of the English language in its earlier and its later forms. Purely linguistic studies need not continue, however, to occupy your time. It is a pity never even to have looked into

Anglo Saxon, but for a student of modern literature a look is enough. To read Chaucer and Wiclif it is not essential to have Anglo Saxon forms in mind. One had much better give his time to the great writers of the last five centuries. It is desirable, however, that the English grammar that one does study should be genuinely scientific. This condition is emphatically not fulfilled by the books that are most accessible in English. One will not go far astray who limits himself to the books of Morris, Earle, and Sweet.

As a final grace to crown his various accomplishments, the teacher of literature should know how to apply his pedagogic skill to the task of selecting from the great body of English writings those portions which are most suitable as material for study by youth of the different degrees of maturity represented in our schools. He must know what are the simple pieces, good for the youngest, and what are the more exacting, good for those who are stronger. To a pupil who is in earnest to read a good book he must be ready to recommend a really good book, suitable for that special case, the reading of which shall both benefit the pupil and exalt his esteem for his adviser.

*S. Thurber*

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## MODERN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS \*

Twenty years ago the modern languages were clamoring for recognition in our school and college programmes. The plea made in their behalf was not always free from extravagance as to the results to be expected from modern language teaching, nor was it always based upon a rational theory of education. It appealed too much to the "practical" instincts of the untrained public, and its claims were often supported by a most unwise polemic against the value of the classical languages in education. In these respects the movement, although conducted with less of

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\*Read at the School and College Conference held at the University of Chicago, Saturday, November 18, 1893.